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ABSTRACT

This booklet reviews the past 20 years, during which Denmark has been committed to the inclusion of children with disabilities in normal school environments (Folkeskoles) when parents wish. The booklet notes the school reform measure enacted in 1969 and the situation prior to 1969. It briefly addresses the following topics: first attempts at integration, developments in the 1970s, the development of special education, statistical data, other areas of education, prerequisites of integration, choice of educational method, teacher attitudes, the Danish teaching concept, resources, various groups of students with disabilities, limits to integration, parent rights, and principles of future development. (DB)

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The Development of the Danish Public School towards a School for All

Integration of handicapped Pupils in the Mainstream School System

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The Development of the Danish Folkeskole towards a School for All

- Integration of Handicapped Pupils in the Mainstream School System

Danish Ministry of Education
1991

1. Introduction

In May 1969, the Danish parliament, the Folketing, passed a resolution about a reform of the basic school system (9-point programme), which included a statement to the effect "that the instruction of handicapped pupils shall be extended in such a way that the children can receive instruction in a normal school environment if the parents so wish and can care for the child at home, and if commitment to an institution is not a necessary part of the treatment".

Now, 20 years after the resolution, it is possible to evaluate the reform and describe to what extent, under what conditions and in what way the integration of the handicapped pupils in the mainstream school has developed.

2. The Situation prior to 1969

Before 1969, many children with severe handicaps were referred to institutions under the special care service, and those enrolled in the Folkeskole often attended separate schools. The influence of the parents on these decisions of segregation was very limited; indeed, the legislation for handicapped persons required that children with special handicaps - e.g blindness - should be referred to special institutions, sometimes far away from their homes.

Already in the early 60s, a group of parents and educationist protested against this situation - a protest that evoked response from the Ministry of Education and many local school authorities. The resolution of the Folketing, therefore, can be viewed as clear political support to an ongoing development towards a Folkeskole more accommodating to the handicapped.

3. The Incipient Integration

The first major attempt to comply with the integration wishes was the establishment of the County education centres in the 60s and early 70s. These centres consisted of special classes placed at the ordinary schools, and many children with more severe handicaps such as visual, hearing and motor disabilities, who would otherwise have been segregated into special care, were enrolled here.

At the same time the municipal schools became very cautious referring blind children to the country's only school for blind persons: the Refsnæsskolen at Kalundborg. Due to their small number, these children could not be gathered together in special classes and were therefore enrolled separately in ordinary classes. Something similar happened to many motor handicapped pupils.

It soon appeared that both centre class and individual integration were

feasible and appropriate solutions, provided that adequate professional and financial resources were available. Consultant arrangements were set up, according to which teachers with special knowledge - often acquired during employment in institutions for handicapped - offered advice to staff from the mainstream schools. Concurrently, the special institutions undertook to make courses, materials, observation and relief periods etc. available to local school authorities.

These initiatives prove that it is not always necessary to bring the client to the expert but that it is feasible too to bring the expertise to where the user is.

4. Developments in the 70s

Throughout the 70s, fewer and fewer children from the Folkeskole were being segregated into special schools but were placed either in special classes in ordinary schools or directly into ordinary classes, where the support of a specially trained teacher was made available for longer or shorter periods of the teaching time.

An increasing number of children and youths from the special care school system received offers of schooling, and in the late 70s practically all severely handicapped children received instruction.

When, in 1980, the instruction of the special care service was transferred to the framework of the Folkeskole, it had become widely understood and accepted that all children can receive instruction, hence are entitled to instruction; which, of course, must be adapted to the qualifications, the possibilities and the needs of the individual pupil.

The idea that the Folkeskole must accommodate all children represents

a challenge, which has clearly, in a positive sense, left its mark on the work with this group of children.

5. The Development of Special Education

Since the 60s, increasing attention has been paid to pupils in the Folkeskole who could not derive adequate benefit from the ordinary instruction.

The efforts of the Folkeskole have reflected a still stronger wish to offer to all pupils the opportunity of optimum development; however, as this objective seems difficult to fulfil for everybody within the scope of ordinary teaching, this task has, in certain cases, been entrusted to special instruction provision. In the process, a much larger number of pupils has been referred to special instruction than was expected 20 years ago. Concurrently, there has been a corresponding growth in the resources spent on special instruction by the Folkeskole.

This development was especially marked up through the 70s, when the number of pupils and the consumption of resources practically doubled whereas, in the 80s, developments have been stagnant.

6. The Present Situation in Figures

By the end of the 80s, approx. 80,000 - or 12-13% - of the pupils in the Folkeskole were referred to special instruction for shorter or longer periods of a school year. The main problem of approx. two thirds of these pupils has been to follow the instruction, in Danish in particular, but also in arithmetic and English. The rest is distributed equally on pupils with physical functioning difficulties (speech impairment, hearing, visual or motor disabilities), pupils with general learning difficulties (mentally retarded) and pupils with behavioural problems.

The referral rate varies considerably from area to area, being for instance approx. twice as high in the Copenhagen area (17.5% in the Copenhagen County) as in West Jut-

land (8.75% in Ringkøbing County). These differences can hardly be accounted for by differences in the population of children but must also be ascribed to varying levels of tolerance and ambition of the general teaching provision as well as to the local social environments.

However, it is characteristic of the development that even though the number of pupils in special education has grown substantially, physical segregation has been used to a still lesser degree. It is also characteristic that the increase, to a large extent, refers to children with reading problems, and that these children normally are not segregated from the class but receive special educational support in a limited number of the weekly lessons, in reading groups, in reading courses or in a reading clinic.

It should be added, however, that also the number of pupils with social behavioural problems has been on the upgrade, and that the nature of their problems has become more severe and thus more difficult to handle within the framework of the ordinary school.

7. Integration

On the whole, the situation as regards the special instruction of the Folkeskole reflects a remarkably high level of integration. Out of the approx. 80,000 pupils referred annually to special instruction, almost 70,000 - or roughly 80% of those referred - receive the special support as a - relatively limited - supplement to the instruction in the ordinary class. Of the roughly 10,000 pupils who are referred to special instruction without affiliation to an ordinary class, roughly 6,000 attend special classes at ordinary schools, while only the remaining 4,000 pupils attend special schools.

This means that only approx. 1/2% of the pupils of the Folkeskole are now taught outside an ordinary school environment.

We have reason to be proud of this development, which is indeed highlighted by the keen interest shown by other countries in our system of special education.

In May of 1990 the education

ministers of the EC adopted a resolution concerning integration of handicapped children and adolescents in the ordinary education systems. It is worth noting that Denmark, already at this point, has gone a long way towards the fulfilment of these intentions.

8. Other Areas of Education

Over a long period, also the private schools - where roughly 10% of all children in the compulsory school age are taught - have admitted a growing number of handicapped pupils. At these schools all special instruction is organized within the framework of the general teaching; thus the handicapped pupils are fully integrated. This also applies to the approx. 250 pupils with more severe handicaps who attend private schools.

Likewise, the youth education courses and the associated supplementary and adult training courses are open to students with functional difficulties; and both the upper-secondary school and the vocational training courses offer special educational support to students with functional impairment who, given the necessary compensatory measures, will be able to complete the course. In any case, full integration exists in this area, as there is no special provision at this level.

In the school year 88/89, approx. 200 students received special educational support in upper-secondary school and approx. 3,000 in vocational education and training.

In further and higher education, likewise, the intake of students with handicaps, primarily in the form of a physical or sensory functional impairment, is growing. This development has been facilitated through improvement of the physical environment at the educational institutions, modern interpretation equipment for the deaf, taped textbooks and use of new technology. Furthermore, in a number of cases, exemption has been granted from the admission requirements in the enrolment of students with handicaps.

9. Prerequisites of the Integration

When the trend towards added integration of children with handicaps in the ordinary school arose and developed in the late 60s, the strongest motive most likely was parent wishes coupled with pedagogical theories about the positive aspects of integration.

Segregation into an institution of special instruction often means a long way to school or perhaps even round-the-clock removal from home. This will often alienate the child in relation to other children in the home neighbourhood; and the general view of the parents often is that although it

is, indeed, valuable for their child at the institution to have the opportunity of acquiring exact knowledge and skills at its own level, it is, at the same time, something negative that the child does not learn to associate with the other children in an ordinary school environment. How are these children supposed to adapt, as adults, to a life in society if they have spent most of their childhood in a special environment with friends just as deviant as they are?

This attitude was supported by many educationists who added - perhaps a little audaciously in the tradition of the day - how will the ordinary pupils in the school ever learn to associate with fellow human beings with handicaps if their entire school career has been devoid of all those who behave or function somewhat differently from they themselves?

In addition, pedagogical research indicated that handicapped children developed better, both socially and in respect of learning, in an ordinary heterogeneous school environment than in a more homogeneous institution.

20-25 years' experience has shown that the situation is not quite that simple, i.a. because both children and parents, teachers and school environments are different. Thus we now know, that integration is not just

omission of segregation. It also involves adaptation of the ordinary school environment so as to cater to the development of the impaired pupil, for instance by providing such special educational support as each individual impaired pupil needs.

10. Choice of Teaching

It has, no doubt, furthered the integration process that integration/segregation was and is not an either-or choice between separate school of special instruction and an ordinary school without special means of support, as is still the case in many other countries. Between these extremes the Danish school can offer a wide range of possibilities, which can be described, in relation to each other, as more or less integrated, which will primarily ensure, however, that the needs of the individual pupil can be met, and school and parents have real options. This flexibility is at the same time a condition and a consequence of the fact that the special needs of a functionally impaired pupil are assessed quite individually without taking account of general diagnoses or standardized test results. Referral to special education is a decision that is made separately, in each case, after an evaluation has been made of a number of solutions in the light of the special requirements of this particular pupil.

In this long series of decision processes the psychological service of the school has played a major role as the team responsible for combining the special educational needs of the pupil with the parents' wishes, the offers of the school and available resources. Consequently, up through the 60s and 70s, the local offices of the school psychological consulting services have been granted more resources; this has meant that, unlike what happens in certain other countries, they could invest more time and expertise in a careful review of possible integrated solutions, instead of automatic segregation.

The pedagogical/psychological study programme that was launched in 1967 at the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies made for a marked improvement of the educational level of the school psychologists. As consultants on choice of schools and optimum integration it has clearly proved an advantage for school psychologists in Denmark - unlike in all other countries - to be trained teachers who, after substantial practical teaching experience, have completed a supplementary training course in psychology.

11. The Teachers

Teaching staffs have had a remarkably positive attitude to the integration efforts and have often played an active role in the process. This applies to teachers in mainstream schools and special schools alike.

Perhaps it has been important that ordinary teachers and special teachers - unlike what is the case in many other countries - share the same basic training and have access to the same in-service training courses. This has allowed an exchange of knowledge and experience to take place between special education and ordinary teaching, which is, indeed, a condition for development in both.

12. The Teaching Concept

Another essential factor in the development process has no doubt been that Denmark - like the other Nordic countries, but in contrast to many other European countries - operates with a fairly broad teaching concept, which implies, as mentioned earlier, that all children are considered to be fit for instruction and to be covered by the preamble of the Act on the Folkeskole. It is widely accepted that the contents of the instruction must be adapted to the requirements of the individual pupil and should not merely be imposed by general professional standards; and in addition, the school - not least throughout the 70s and 80s - has been able to involve a social, educative dimension into its activities.

To a large extent, this development has been necessitated by the fact that 4/5 of the parent group have joined the labour market on a full-time basis (including 60-70% of the mothers), and that the grandparents, for various reasons, help out to a still lesser degree with the care and the upbringing of the children.

13. The Resources

Integration is feasible only if necessary resources are provided for the teaching framework, in which the integration takes place. This applies in equal measure to a situation of non-segregation and to a situation in which the pupil, after having been referred to an institution of special instruction, is being transferred back to the mainstream school (integration).

In the former situation - which has, by now, become the most frequent by far - it has been up to the local school authorities to decide whether they wanted to spend special resources on integrated instruction, though, up to 1980, with the formal limitation that the relevant legislation, including its provisions on the distribution of costs, gave incentive to the Folkeskole of referring severely handicapped pupils to schools under the special care provision.

If an increasing number of pupils with potentials as special care pupils, in the 70s, were, after all, integrated, the reason was that local school systems took on tasks they were not obliged to take on, and for which the government was economically responsible. The system of rather ample

block grants coupled with the liberal municipal tax system probably promoted what was then referred to as "the sneaking integration".

After decentralization of the special care services in 1980 it became easier to let "the resources follow the child", and even though there are still two levels of authority involved in the comprehensive special education provision of the Folkeskole (local authorities and counties), most decisions on choice of school for the individual pupil are made without taking much account of the resource allocation. In general, there has been a useful cooperation between local authorities and counties regarding referral of the child, and it has no doubt also helped matters that the resource needs of each pupil are almost identical in the integrated as in the segregated situation.

It is worth mentioning, however, that integration policies differ somewhat from region to region, and that there are local discrepancies within regions. It has been easier for some counties than for others to cope with a dual situation where, on the one hand, they had to maintain - and pay for - a special school provision and, on the other, they also had to pay when the pupils received instruction in the municipal schools. In most cases, however, it has been possible to comply with the parents' wishes as regards choice of school; and it can in general be stated that the character and degree of integration in Denmark is in close correspondence with the wishes of the users - in casu, the parents.

14. The Various Groups of Handicapped

Some functional problems have been easier to tackle in the ordinary school than others. In general, handicaps such as communication failure - deafness, autism, severe mental handicaps - have presented the greatest difficulties. As far as deaf chil-

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dren are concerned who are dependent on sign language, it has not been possible to set up integrated solutions that are acceptable to the parents; hence, most of these parents prefer to have their children attend schools for deaf. The same applies, to a high degree, to autistic or psychotic children. As regards mentally handicapped, including multi-handicapped, children, certain experiments have been made in various parts of the country, the result of which is that some parents are for, others against integration of their child in the ordinary school.

Other groups of handicapped children give adequate proof of successful integration so that it is safe to say that it is both possible and fruitful for these children to receive instruction in an ordinary school environment.

15. Limits to Integration

During the 20-30-year period, in which integration has been a fundamental principle in Denmark's educational policy, it has often been pointed out from various quarters, that there are children who cannot be integrated, and that integration was not beneficial in all cases.

The development, however, has shown that the possibilities were greater than the limitations, and that the integration often succeeded in practice in cases where it had been deemed impossible in theory.

In spite of this experience, there are none the less situations where the choice between an integrated and a segregated school placement will forthwith favour the segregated solution. Such a choice is based on the combined considerations of the nature and degree of the handicap and the endeavours made to adapt the ordinary school to the pupil concerned.

16. Parent Rights

The choice between an ordinary school and a special school is never an easy one, and both solutions will have positive as well as negative aspects in many cases. It is therefore important that the parents have a decisive influence on the choice. For many years, a special school was the only option available to many handicapped children, thus leaving the parents with no choice. The position now is that the parents, in most cases, can decide if they want their handicapped child to attend an ordinary school or a special school. In addition, there are many ways in which parents can seek advice and guidance about their child's possibilities and needs; also, the choice of school is not binding for the whole school career. The parents are entitled to a reevaluation, at least once a year, of their child's school situation. This could involve a change of school, if, for instance, a successful integration

that has taken place at one of the lower form levels runs into trouble at the time of adolescence.

17. Status and Future

The degree of integration of handicapped pupils in the ordinary school in Denmark has reached a level, which is hardly matched by any other country. Whether or not it will be possible to progress even further is an open question, which depends on a number of factors. As far as we are concerned, the following points must have an impact on future developments:

- that the Folkeskole - and the rest of the education system - should continue to aim at being able to demonstrate such consideration and flexibility that a handicap in itself does not prevent real integration,

- that it is primarily up to the users/parents - on the basis of useful consultation - to decide on the character and degree of integration,

- that a wide range of possibilities should still be available so that parents have a real choice,

- that the total responsibility for the Folkeskole should gradually be transferred to the primary municipalities,

- continued development - at local, regional and national level - of adequate educational and pedagogical expertise to support and qualify the integration,

- that fulfilment of the aggregate needs of the handicapped child for special educational, social and medical support should be coordinated at local level, so that it will constitute a full support effort,

- that integration is always organized and carried through in such a way that it constitutes a positive and fruitful experience for everybody involved in the process,

- that the teachers are trained in such a way, on a current basis, that they can differentiate their teaching so as to allow for the multiplicity of the pupils,

- that a pedagogical/psychological consulting function is maintained to offer guidance and support in difficult teaching situations.